

Negotiating Privately for an Effective Role in Public Space

Negotiating Privately for an Effective Role
in Public Space:
A Case Study of Women in Panchayats
of Orissa, India

By

Hiranmayee Mishra

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To millions of rural Indian women who have dared to bridge the gap
between the public and private world

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FOREWORD

Writing a foreword for this book is very much overwhelming for me. In fact it was the result of a challenging phase of my life when I took the decision to go to England to have a PhD.

I have undertaken an empirical study in eight *Gram Panchayats* (the institutions that work at the village level), in Cuttack Sadar Block in Orissa. My field study took place in two periods between July 2008 and February 2009 (with a gap of one month in between). I followed a feminist methodology with multiple methods, consisting of: participant observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews, with 38 participants. I attempt to focus on the different levels of barriers which my respondents face in their new roles and how they are negotiating with their families to overcome these obstacles. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all of those without whose support I could have never completed this work.

I am grateful to International Ford Foundation for their fellowship and their generous funding which took me to United Kingdom, one of the most beautiful countries of the world with the most beautiful people I have ever known or met.

It's been a privilege to work under the supervision of Professor the Baroness Haleh Afshar, who has been so kind to offer me all her guidance, support and most importantly, enough time from her multi tasking, over booked schedules.

Thanks to Prof. Stevi Jackson, for all her suggestions during the TAP meetings and her interest in my work.

I thank the ever-helpful staff and friends in the CWS, for the warmth, friendship and their constant mental support. I don't have enough words to express my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Ann Kalosky Naylor, for her incredible support. Thank you so much, Ann, for all your encouragement and personal treats, all the tea sessions, warm hugs and everything, in my bad times and good times.

My friends, Somayyeh, Natasha, Kai, Tina, Pranati, Julia, Liz and Sasmita, you all have helped me keep going here, away from my family and home, thank you all.

Thanks to all my participants of this study who shared with me so gladly their stories of struggles and hopes and living with them have been

such an eye-opening experience for me. Without their co-operation and friendship, it would have never been possible for me to get such a firsthand account of their lives. I am grateful to Revati, Asmita, Padmini and my sister-in-law who offered me a place at their homes, fed me and I am grateful to all the men and women of the *Gram Panchayats* who made me feel welcome in their villages. Thank you very much.

I moved to UK, in 2007 and started to live on my own, for the first time in my life, after 17years of married life. My daughter was only five years old when I left her. It was very difficult in the beginning for me and there were times when I wondered if I would manage to stay here for three to four years. I owe all my thanks to my husband, Arun, without whose constant support, understanding and encouragement, I believe, this would not have been possible at all.

Lots of thanks to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their kind support to publish this work. I have no words to thank Carol Koulikourdi for her patient waiting and understanding.

Thank you, all.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“If an ancestral treasure lying buried in a corner of the house unknown to the members of the family were suddenly discovered, what a celebration it would occasion. Similarly, women’s marvellous power is lying dormant. If the women of Asia wake up, they will dazzle the world.” (Mahatma Gandhi, Message to Chinese Women, July 18, 1947)

The personal is political

Nineteen ninety three was the year when I married and also the year the historic 73rd Amendment to the Indian constitution, mandating 33% seats for women in all three tiers¹ of *Panchayats*² was accepted by the union government. On the personal front, this was the year when I freed myself from an orthodox, conservative high class label after long struggles inside my family. At the same time, for the large number of women living in rural areas of India this amendment also guaranteed a new atmosphere of increased freedom in public spaces. My marriage is important for my study because I understand that if I had not taken the decision to marry out of my caste and class, as a result of which I had to face many problems, I could never have known and appreciated the struggles and challenges of rural women belonging to different classes of Indian society. When I married I started living in a rural locality, with rural people, for the first time in my life. In contrast to this, I was born and brought up as the urban educated daughter of a high class and high caste family.

My in laws belonged to lower economic group and lower caste than my parental family which became a reason for my lifelong disconnection from my parents. I started my married life with my husband and his family

¹ The rural local self government system operates over three levels, which is known as a three-tier system in India. There is the *Zilla Parishad* operating at the District level, the *Panchayat Samiti* operating at the Block level and *Gram Panchayats* which operate at the Village level. More discussions on these are conducted in the following chapters.

² *Panchayat* is the name of the rural local self government in India.

in an unusual way, without any support from my parents and family. In retrospect, I think that it played an important role to make me more experienced and open my eyes to the type of life that the common Indian woman is largely subject to. I never knew that women received less food to eat than men, never had any idea that women work so much from dawn to dusk in managing households and never knew that girls are considered a burden. I would not say I had complete freedom of choice before my marriage because I came from a rich family; rather that by seeing all the options, I became conscious of the discriminations I faced as a daughter. The innumerable small incidents which I had otherwise taken for granted when I experienced them flashed in front of me and I began to feel terribly disturbed. Questions as to 'why?', 'how?' and 'where?' kept coming into my mind each day as I led a group of 50 young girls in the college where I worked as the programme officer of the girls' wing of the National Service Scheme³ and listened to their personal stories. I was teaching political science at the same time and my young girl student volunteers and I were very close. I became their mentor over many years and in 1997, one student, Sunanda, contested the election for a reserved seat as a *Sarpanch*.⁴ I was present, at her request, when she started her campaign and on the first day high caste people of her village closed their doors as she was a girl from a scheduled caste⁵. I was shocked to witness this and was lacking in ideas as to how she might respond to this prejudice. After two weeks she rang me to inform me that she had won. I beamed with hope and congratulated her. This was my very first experience of empowerment. In the following years there were many challenges for her, but with the support of her brother and father and all the women of her village she brought a whole world of changes to that village and to community life. In the elections that followed, reserved or unreserved, the women of that village never hesitated to contest the *Panchayat* elections.

It became of interest to me to follow the women who became involved in the politics of the *Panchayats* and there were many of my students who were aspirants to political power in village *Panchayats* after reservations and reforms were in place. My sisters in law (my husband's sister and his brother's wife) were also contesting elections at the *Panchayat* level, both of them being elected in their *Gram Panchayats*. I was able to observe

³ Popularly known as NSS, this is a scheme run by the Indian Parliament which is meant to make young students aware of social issues and help them find possible solutions.

⁴ *Sarpanch* is the leader in a *Gram Panchayat*.

⁵ The Scheduled Castes are a group of castes which are low in the Indian caste system and these are mentioned in the schedules to the Indian constitution.

women from circles close to me becoming leaders, facing challenges and I witnessed some of them gaining more confidence day by day. The women were having meetings among themselves where they would discuss village problems and their concerns about making their demands heard at the Block⁶ level. Many times they discussed these issues in their houses during odd hours of the afternoon, some of them struggling to feed their babies, some attending to sick elders in between comments, and some with anxieties about handling an arrogant husband back home. I was the only married woman of this village with a higher educational degree and as I was working in the local college the women never hesitated to allow me to sit with them. For the first time, I noticed the dynamics of a lower class society: that lower class societies were more liberal to the women than the higher class societies and women from lower castes had more freedom than women from higher caste groups and that their male relatives had no objections in permitting the women to work outside their homes. The overall pictures of the nearby *Panchayats* were changing and within some years there would be changes in the social and cultural fabric of the villages and in the lives of the women involved.

There were of course also visible changes in my personal life as I began to experience a growing sense of feminist consciousness. My father in law, who was an illiterate man in his 90s, was always encouraging me whenever I had to go out. From a woman waiting for permission to leave the home, I was encouraged to become a woman able to make decisions for her family. I realised and understood the importance of gaining the support of one's family in rural India and how this leads to increased self confidence. It was all so new and so thought provoking for me. There were many similarities, yet so many differences among the rural women and myself, all of whom belonged to the same region of India.

The coincidences in my life and the lives of the rural women around me, which occurred due to this political landscape, made me interested in conducting an in depth study of those rural women who emerged from their houses to capitalise on seat reservations for women in *Panchayats*, believing that nothing could be more engaging for me than this. Orissa and more particularly, the district of Cuttack, became my obvious option for field study as I had lived there for many years. It was also important as I came to know that there was not a single study conducted on women

⁶ A number of *Gram Panchayats* work under a Block which is known as a *Panchayat Samiti*. Leaders of each *Gram Panchayat* (*Sarpanches*) and the representatives from the *Gram Panchayats* (Nominees) attend the monthly meetings held at a *Panchayat Samiti* where policy decisions are made based on the demands of the *Sarpanches* and Nominees.

involved in the politics of the *Panchayats* of this district of the region; that is, after the 73rd amendment⁷ provided a ‘not less than one third seats’ reservation⁸ for women. I did not want to work with the women of the particular locality in which my in laws lived, and instead chose to work with women from a distant *Gram Panchayat* but within the Cuttack District, so as to carry out the study as an unbiased researcher. A study on any aspect of rural Indian women today is multi layered and complex. I have worked among and with women who are unlikely to be able to read what I have done with their long interviews. They do not even have the slightest idea of what a book on their life histories looks like. Yet they all insisted on being named in my work in recognition of the work that they are doing. As a feminist researcher, I have always attempted to foreground their voices, although I am aware, in all honesty, that I cannot claim to be speaking for them. I have put great effort into writing about them using their own words alongside my own understanding of their lives.

The 73rd amendment

My research attempts to examine the effects of this amendment to the Indian constitution on the lives of rural Indian women. At this stage, it is important to briefly consider what this amendment stands for as this is a very important part of my research. I suggest it is one of the most significant attempts at transforming the Indian polity in the direction of greater democratization and decentralization of power (Raman, 2002: 4). Coming into effect on the 24th April 1993, the purpose of the 73rd amendment was to revitalize the three tier system of local governance in rural India known as *Panchayats*.

The amendment mandated a wider representation for historically marginalized and excluded groups like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women, thus deepening the roots of democracy. Following the amendment, people from the scheduled castes and tribes are now

⁷ Article 243(D) has been amended through this Amendment. The Article is provided in the Appendix.

⁸ I have used ‘reservations of seats for women’ and ‘gender quota’ or ‘quotas for women’ interchangeably throughout this thesis. However, I am aware that there is a contextual difference between these two- ‘reservation of seats’ and ‘quota’. Though it is known to be ‘reservation of seats’ in India, I chose to use ‘quota’, as the contemporary literature refers to the preferential treatment for women as ‘quota’ (Hust, 2002; Nussbaum, 2002; Jayal, 2006; Rai, 2008). However, the policies providing for the ‘reservations of seats for women’ or ‘gender quota’ fulfil the similar goal of bringing more women to political offices (Krook, 2010: 6).

represented in proportion to their population in *Gram Panchayat* (village council) areas, in terms of membership and in proportion to their population in each state and in the position of the *Panchayat* chairperson; one-third of all seats are reserved for women generally in each *Panchayat*, that is, at the village cluster level, at the block level, and at the district level. Women from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes have a similar one-third reservation in the positions reserved for these communities.

The reservation is to be rotated among the various constituencies and *Panchayats* to ensure the participation of a large number of women and enable women of different *Panchayats* to enter in place of the same women coming to power in each election. Regular elections are to be held every five years and financial resources are to be devolved by the setting up of state finance commissions and central finance commissions. The states have been mandated to make *Panchayats* institutions of self-government and to give them responsibility for planning and implementing schemes for economic development and social justice for which appropriate functions and responsibilities have to be devolved. The constitutional amendment was soon followed by state-level legislation in all states which brought the *Panchayat* laws into conformity with the requirements of the constitution. However, even before this amendment was passed, Orissa had been the first state to hold a 33% reservation for women (in 1991) (Palanithurai, 2002: 56). So, there were already women who had been elected as representatives in all three tiers of *Panchayat* in 1993 when this act became effective in all other parts of India. The 73rd amendment only made the one third reservations of seats for women in *Panchayats* more popular with women increasingly coming to know about it due to a proliferation of advertisements in the media following its implementation by the Union Government. A unique provision of Orissa, the *Gram Panchayat* Act (1991) states that if the elected or nominated *Sarpanch* of the *Gram Panchayat* is not a woman, the office of the *Naib-Sarpanch*⁹ will go to a woman. This is also the provision made for the Chairperson of the *Panchayat Samitis*.

In the very first round of elections following this important intervention, in 1994 and 1995, nearly one million women entered the threshold of local self-government political institutions (Raman, 2002: 4). In subsequent years this number has been seen to rise.

⁹ A *Naib-Sarpanch* is the Deputy Chairperson or the official who is the immediate subordinate to the *Sarpanch* in a *Gram Panchayat*.

Focus of the study

The important research questions which I am trying to address here are multi layered. At the outset I am trying to investigate the story of these women in their own voices and consider how far they have gained access to resources as well as how far they were able to change their own self-image after these reforms were made in rural local self government units. To deal with this I will be looking at the following questions:

a. Have the quotas through the 73rd amendment Act been effective in creating a space for rural women in local governance and how instrumental have *Gram Panchayats* been in enabling rural women to exercise their power to impact on policy and direct decision making?

b. What are the different barriers that exist in a patriarchal Indian society and how are these elected women representatives at the *Gram Panchayats* negotiating in both private and public spheres in order to perform effectively their roles in the public terrain?

c. Have these women started to break the silence and challenge the male-dominated norms of their society and how empowering has been the experience of women who are participating in these grassroots institutions so far, both in terms of transforming these institutions and for the women themselves?

I started my study in 2007 and undertook my field work in 2008 and 2009. It was the long 15 years since women came to power in *Panchayats* which offered me a good opportunity to study the changes this brought at a community level as well as the impact it made on the personal lives of these women. These were of course not the same women who came to power each time, but they were women from the same neighbourhood, from nearby villages and from the same network groups; they were definitely encouraged by the state's initiatives to bring women into local government institutions. This thesis largely draws on the words of my women participants who were elected representatives of the eight *Gram Panchayats* in Cuttack Sadar Block, most of whom had little or no education.

Summary of the chapters

This introduction is followed by a chapter on the experiences of Indian women in politics in national, regional and local governments in the years following Independence. More specifically, I deal with the role of women following Indian Independence. Women who emerged in response to

Mahatma Gandhi's call to be involved in the National movement were, in a way, fighting for their own freedom from a patriarchal society. This chapter presents a background to my study and deals with how some of the women leaders of the post-independence India carefully worked to involve more women in politics. However, the condition of ordinary Indian women did not improve during this period as women involved in politics at this early stage were mainly from families with political affiliations. They were also mainly from the elite class. The question of women's reservations came up in the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974. The Report noted that in spite of equal rights and universal adult suffrage guaranteed by the Indian constitution, women's presence in the state and central legislatures had been declining steadily over the years. Along with a section on this report, this chapter throws light on the other important policy interventions that were subsequently made to improve the representation of women, especially in local government. The 73rd Amendment Act and its various implications are discussed in detail here.

To contextualise the study, the third chapter throws light on conceptual issues involved in the study. It discusses concepts like 'critical mass',¹⁰ citizenship, political participation of women and political empowerment. I attempt to examine the relevance of the debates surrounding these concepts in the existing literature to my study and in doing so, I seek to explore the connectedness of quotas to the empowerment of women. I understand that quotas are important to create a 'critical mass' at the decision-making level, but in case of these rural women, how far this can lead to their effectiveness and how the women see their participation are my concerns. The existing literature on women in *Panchayats* evidences that *Panchayats* in Orissa have been less researched than in other parts of India. This chapter helps to place the present work in the front line, as well as filling in a gap in the timeline, as previous studies were mostly conducted within the first 10 years of the reforms.

Chapter four addresses my choice of multiple methods and methodology. Using a multiple method was the most viable way forward as I needed to study the participants from a very close angle. The methodology chapter deals with the obstacles I faced in accessing my participants and gives an account of my experience with the interviewees. I stayed in two locations for participant observation as it was important to build up a rapport with the researched and know them in their private

¹⁰ The term 'critical mass' was borrowed from nuclear physics, where it refers to the quantity needed to start a chain reaction, an irreversible turning point, a take-off into a new situation or process (Dahlerup, 1988: 275-76).

settings. My field study ranged over five months in two phases and was interrupted by a severe flood. This chapter deals with my experiences of living and working with these women and the collection of empirical data. It deals with the power relationship operating between me as the researcher and my participants as the researched. I also discuss my ability to access these women and how I was able to gain their trust and co-operation, which was so vital for this type of ethnographic study. It also touches upon the operational structure of the decentralised system in Orissa and the implication of the reforms on this. It shows the line of control of the *Panchayat* institutions and how the *Gram Panchayats* can be controlled by the lower units of villages, as the lower unit derives its authority from all the adult members of the village. Detailed information about the methods that I followed in the course of my investigation, which consisted of participant observation, focus groups and in depth interviews, is presented in this chapter.

The fifth chapter discusses the cultural, social and political contexts as experienced by the respondents in their villages. This deals with issues like representation and political participation of women from rural India. This also includes a detailed explanation of the obstacles these women have to face when entering the political arena. Therefore, the problems which they see as important for them come to take precedence over the theoretical issues around the participation of women or gender identity. This part of the dissertation prioritises women's voices about the barriers that they have to overcome at a myriad of different levels. A brief discussion on the issues of the representation of women also disentangles the hidden dynamics of the lives of Indian rural women which may be unknown to western scholars. For example, it exposes the lack of choice experienced by these women, for tradition forces them to live with their in laws on marriage, often in a different part of the country; therefore they experience an immediate loss of identity as political citizens in the early phase of their married lives. Indeed, it appears that their struggles with public space begin when they register their names in their new location as someone's spouse.

Chapter six considers the impact of political change on the lives of the participants. This focuses on how my respondents' participation in *Gram Panchayats* has led to a new sense of identity which may be experienced as a kind of empowerment for them. However, empowerment may be a misleading or much contested term for the feminist researcher. I have attempted to look at the process of empowerment as my interviewees understand it today. Their effective participation has led to definite, positive impacts, taking different forms in the lives of the women under

investigation. This has led to them changing their lifestyles and making them feel more confident in some areas, although they still feel a burden in some others as innumerable problems hinder their journeys. The participants consider problems like connecting to a political base in a new locality and the burden of their expected reproductive and productive roles, which plays out in their private lives, as their main obstacles. There is also an account of the strategies that these participants have followed in order to negotiate these barriers with family members. The family is a priority for women in rural India and gaining support from family members and male colleagues has helped them considerably in maintaining both their personal and public worlds. They have been able to create better networking opportunities among the groups of women who were involved in *Panchayat* politics, and helped each other raise their voices within and outside the family unit. This chapter also throws light on the extent to which this empowerment has influenced women's lives on a day-to-day basis.

Chapter seven deals with the outcomes of my participants' participation and the changes they brought to bear on policy decisions. There have been continuous attempts by the participants to bring about definite change in their localities. They have prioritised issues related to women and girls and highlighted the issues, or barriers, which impacted them when they first accessed the political arena. Identifying problems based on their own experiences, they therefore give much more importance to the education of girls, better health facilities and better communication for their villages. This allows us an insight into where the women's perceptions come from, especially as my intention is to use a bottom up approach from an actor's point of view (in this case, the actors being the participants of my study). I further discuss the different changing family dynamics in rural India and how they are embedded in the social structure.

The final chapter contains conclusions based on my experience as a participant observer and the long, largely unstructured interviews with my participants. The long hours of formal and informal talks I had with these women, inside their houses and in the premises of the *Panchayat* offices, have changed my ideas and perceptions about these rural women a great deal. It has been an enlightening experience as much for me as for my participants. This concluding chapter also comments upon my own perceptions as an insider researcher and my experience of this research process so far.

I started with a set agenda and ended up giving more attention to my researched women's agenda. I have also attempted to articulate my

problems as a feminist researcher and highlight where I went wrong with my preconceived ideas. Where I was unable to make further explorations, due to my lack of resources, and how I end up creating a sisterly bond with my study participants is also briefly considered. However, this chapter is mainly composed of closing reflections and the summation of the study findings. How I see this research leading to further questions or interests of scholars is discussed in the last section of the work.

CHAPTER TWO

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the background of the study. It includes a short description of the position of women in Indian politics before and after Independence and helps to situate my investigation. I attempt to unpack the different factors which finally resulted in the national government providing a policy for the reservation of seats for women in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions. In doing so, I also touch upon different structural interventions by the state and the role of women's groups. This chapter is broadly divided into two sections. In the first section I discuss the background from a national perspective and in the second I focus more on the Orissan scenario. I conclude with a diagrammatic representation of the *Panchayats* at different levels.

From national independence to reservations

The end of colonial power in India brought not only a new form of government but also a series of new ideas, which disturbed the previously silent waters of traditional Indian society. Social reformers realised that women's issues were important in preparing a society for progressive thought. All over the country, they have shown their willingness to fight issues such as *Sati*,¹ child-marriage, female infanticide, *purdah*,² polygamy and inappropriate consequences of widowhood, all of which were essentially hampering the lives of Indian women. Education for girls in India was thus considered important in this process of awakening. At the same time, these forces of change penetrating the private lives of Indian

¹ *Sati* refers to a funeral practice among some Hindu communities where a recently widowed woman would, either voluntarily or by use of force and coercion, immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This practice has been declared illegal in modern India.

² *Purdah* here means women covering their heads or operating behind curtains (it is different from the Islamic *hejab*).

women have had their own effects. During the period of National movement, women's meetings to discuss their status and ways to improve their lives were started with the support of Indian men. Gradually women realised the need for different fora for discussing their views, and women's organisations started to work to improve the conditions of women. Fighting for their own freedom led them towards fighting for the freedom of their country. Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi's leadership gave them a new lease of life in terms of freedom and participation in the public sphere. The activities of women in India at that time were public, but not always essentially political. They were participating all over the country in activities such as organising campaigns against the injustices of colonial power and in favour of boycotting the use of foreign goods, and other public activities. The women of India made their own contribution to the National Movement which finally freed India from colonial power on August 15th, 1947. As Ray notes, '...nearly ten percent of the prisoners in the independence movement were women with babies in their arms' (1999: 9). Women were also involved in the relief work in riot-stricken areas following partition.³ After Independence, with the introduction of the Indian constitution, women were theoretically guaranteed equality in all spheres. During these early years, the participation of women in electoral activities was fairly common, with a number of active women leaders involved in the National Movement. This prepared them for taking up their roles as equal citizens under the constitution of a free nation. Unfortunately, the number of women in political spheres of power gradually declined thereafter. Despite various promises by political parties and leaders at different times, women were systematically marginalised from the higher echelons of power. Nevertheless, elite women continued to work for the inclusion of women in politics, with women leaders in India showing concern about the barriers preventing the mass of women from entering into the field of politics. There were women leaders at national and regional level who put all their efforts into countering the political isolation of women. Women leaders in both parliament and the state legislatures often crossed party lines in support of women's issues. In more recent years, the constant pressure exerted by women's organisations and women leaders in the legislative bodies resulted in the empowerment of women being pushed to the top of the governmental agenda. This finally led to the reservation of seats for women in grass root democratic institutions. Reservations for women have been seen as the only possible way to ensure the participation of women in politics in the significant

³ Freedom for India came after partition of the country into two nations, India and Pakistan, formed on the basis of religion.

numbers that are important in a democracy. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts of 1992 to the Indian Constitution, which came into effect from 24th April and 1st June 1993 respectively, have emerged as the most important structural interventions by the state. The 73rd Amendment Act requires not less than one third of seats to be reserved for women in rural local bodies, while the 74th Amendment Act requires not less than one third of seats to be reserved for women in urban local bodies. This provision also extends to leadership positions in both these self-government units and provides reservations for women belonging to all groups, including the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups, both recognised by the constitution as belonging to the most marginalised sections of Indian society.

Rural local bodies in India are known as *Panchayati Raj* institutions, or PRIs. Following the historical Amendments to the constitution in 1993, the very first election of these bodies in 1994 finally brought about one million women to the decision-making level through the reservation of seats in *Panchayats* and other local bodies (Raman, 2002: 4). This number has increased over subsequent years. The phenomenon of the docile, submissive and mostly illiterate common women of India becoming assertive and articulate leaders of *Panchayats* and proving their excellence in dealing with the ensuing challenges of power has become an important concern for research.

Women in politics, over the years

The history of the Indian struggle for independence displays a gradual movement of Indian women into the national polity. At a time when most women were illiterate and unaware of their political rights or obligations or even the feeling of nationalism, their involvement in the independence struggle of the nation was quite unexpectedly high. However, it is important to observe that almost all of those women belonged to elite classes, predominantly families where the male members supported the national movement. Women from Jawaharlal Nehru's family: his mother, Mrs. Swarupa Rani, Mrs. Kamala Nehru, his wife and Vijayalaxmi Pandit, his sister, were all active participants in the National Movement. There was also Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, who was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, and Mrs. Sucheta Kripalani, who belonged to a very politically active family. Her husband, Mr. Acharya Kripalani, was also involved in the freedom movement.

The women who participated in the freedom struggle not only fought for the country, but were instrumental in fighting for the cause of women. It is clear that Indian women who joined the National Movement wanted

to share the responsibilities equally with the male leaders. The participation of women in national life increased the faith of the nation in the power of women, and increased their own self esteem too. It not only increased the confidence of women leaders who were directly involved in the movement, but also encouraged the common women of the country to enter into the public sphere. While women from elite families were more noticed, there were also hundreds of other Indian women who made sacrifices and contributed to the cause of Indian freedom, although their role remained largely invisible. It must be underlined that women were active in all spheres of political life across the board during the National Movement period.

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu was among the few women elected to the Constituent Assembly, the body entrusted with the responsibility of drafting a constitution for Independent India. She also became the first ever woman Governor of Uttar Pradesh⁴ on 15th August, 1947, the day of India's independence. Additionally, there were Durgabai Deshmukh, Renuka Ray and Hansa Mehta. Durgabai Deshmukh was the first woman in the Planning Commission of independent India. She also headed the National Committee on Women's Education (1958-1959), which focussed on the barriers faced by women in achieving a higher education and suggested different measures for breaking through these barriers to the Government of India. Active in politics during the pre-independence and immediate post-independence years, Durgabai Deshmukh was essentially an administrator who built up the Central Social Welfare Board (Baig, 1976: 189). Hansa Mehta was known for her strong arguments against any provisions of privilege in favour of women in the Indian constitution. She was appointed as the Chairman of the Committee on Differentiation of Curricula for Boys and Girls in 1962 by the Government of India.

The women leaders who were active in both the pre- and post-independence period saw education for Indian women as a gateway to enable them to become useful citizens as well as a path for their own personal enhancement. It is interesting to observe that, while much attention by feminist movements has focussed on franchise rights for women in the West, women in India never had to fight long for this. Franchise rights came to Indian women in 1950, with a Universal Adult Franchise granted in the constitution of Independent India.

From the beginning of the Indian constitution, there were provisions of quotas for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, although not for

⁴ Uttar Pradesh is the biggest state in India and the most powerful in Central politics with the maximum number of members in the Indian Parliament. It is situated very near to Delhi, the Union Capital.

women. Women were excluded from development areas, and not treated as a marginalised group in the original 1950 constitution. As women leaders were visibly active in all spheres of political activity they considered it disrespectful to claim quotas rather than to achieve it on their own merit. Even Hansa Mehta, who was Parliamentary Secretary in Bombay and a member of the Constituent Assembly, declared on 19th December, 1946 that:

We have never asked for privileges. What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice and political justice. We have asked for that equality which can alone be the basis of mutual respect and understanding and without which, real co-operation is not possible between man and woman (quoted in Desai and Thakkar, 2005: 14).

So, the Indian constitution did not provide any reservations for women, instead it mentioned rural self-government⁵ with women members in a chapter called 'The directive principles of state policy'. Right from the beginning, the state has attempted to ensure the presence of women in these local bodies that operate at the village level. At its third meeting, held in Srinagar in 1957, the Central Council of Local Government recorded that the elected representatives (about 20 in number in each *Panchayat* block), 'will co-opt two women who are interested to work among women and children' (Buch, 2005b: 236). At the same time, the *Balwant Rai Mehta* Committee also recommended the induction of two women members in *Panchayats* in order to carry out specific programmes relating to the welfare of children and women.

Traditionally, *Panchayats* in Indian villages were bodies of elders (preferably five or more, indeed, *panch* in Hindi means five⁶), who came together to settle disputes among the villagers. Therefore, it is clear that for some time these *Panchayats* served no purpose as units of local government. Directing attention towards the welfare of local people or discussing gender issues was nowhere in sight. However, following recommendations made by the *Balwant Rai Mehta* Committee, different states started providing specific numbers of seats in *Panchayats* for women. Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka were among the first states to implement these reservation provisions for women. In 1957, the rural Local Self Government Committee of Madhya Pradesh recommended *Panchayats* having 18 members, including three

⁵ Rural self-government is the *Panchayati Raj* System.

⁶ Even today, in rural parts of India, a meeting of a *Gram Panchayat* is referred to as '*Panch Parameswar*', meaning the meeting of five Gods.

nominated members, i.e. a Patel, a woman and a representative from a cooperative society. The committee acknowledged that:

We are in favour of according representation to them by means of nomination in view of the need to encourage women in rural areas to participate in civic affairs even though a woman or women come to be elected to *Panchayats*. Accordingly, we have already suggested inclusion of a woman by nomination when recommending the minimum number of *panches*⁷ for a *Panchayat*. In *Janpad*⁸ *Panchayats* if no woman or a member of SC or ST comes to be elected, such members should be co-opted (Report of Rural Local Self Government Committee, 1959: 23, in Buch, 2005b: 237)

Apart from some women becoming important actors on the political stage during these early years of Indian independence, the five year plans of the Government of India promised much for the development of women, although all these policies and promises approached women as objects of development. The common Indian woman was seldom given any chance to participate as an active agent in a process that was designed for her wellbeing. However, this governmental approach was seriously challenged in 1974 by the 'Towards Equality' report on the status of women.

'Towards equality' and its effects

Following the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women by the General Assembly in 1967, the UN urged its member states to present reports on the status of women in their countries. The Government of India created a committee to assess the status of women (CSWI) which submitted its report, entitled 'Towards Equality', in May, 1975. This was a milestone in making the whole country realise the real status of women in India. The report accused the Indian state of large-scale discrimination on the grounds of gender, whilst also recognising the problems and needs of different socio-economic groups of women. To quote from the report:

The National Committee on the status of women observes that women have a negligible impact on the political process, that they constitute a

⁷ A member of a *Panchayat* is called a *Panch*.

⁸ *Janpad Panchayat* is the local name for a Block level or middle tier *Panchayat* in some parts of northern India.

numerical majority, they are slowly acquiring the features of a minority group because of inequalities of status and political power (ICSSR, 1974).

Parliamentary debates on the committee's report gave a wide mandate to the government 'to remove all disabilities that Indian women continue to suffer from...' (Mazumdar in Bandyopadhyaya, 2000: 2697), but in the turmoil of the internal Emergency declared by the National Government shortly thereafter⁹, this issue was temporarily forgotten.

Nevertheless, the report was a shock to everyone, including Indian women, for after 27 years of Independence they were still performing the traditional roles expected of them by men and suffering from large-scale illiteracy, poor health, marginalised employment and violence and had practically no voice in the decision-making processes of their country or even in other spheres of life. The report was treated as a landmark in the history of the women's movement in India. Singla considers it an eye opener, even for those women who initiated the report (2007: 30). She perhaps meant by this that even the women who demanded a report on the status of women at that point in time were surprised by the outcomes. Among many other recommendations for the provision of an improved status for women, this report states that it is only by reserving a certain percentage of seats in *Panchayati Raj* institutions that women can be expected to enter these institutions in larger numbers and participate effectively. The committee therefore recommended the establishment of statutory women's *Panchayats* at the village level so as to ensure an increased role for women in the political sphere in local government (Vidya, 2007: 14). The recommendations of the committee changed the strategy of those women leaders who were initially against a reservation policy for women. Prominent feminists who had never thought of reservations as a solution to bringing women into the power structure of their country began advocating it as a necessary step (Singla, 2007: 30).

Although the debates surrounding 'critical mass'¹⁰ (the feminist argument for having women in a definite number at the decision-making level), systematic developments aimed at bringing more women into politics in the western world and recommendations for providing seats for women in Indian political bodies via quotas came almost at the same

⁹ On 1st of July, 1975, Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in order to meet internal threats to the nation's security. This is the only experience of Indian nation being put under emergency rule (1975-1977). This period is known as the most corrupt period with maximum state intervention in the private lives of Indian citizens.

¹⁰ I discuss the concept of 'critical mass' further in the following chapter.

period of time, scholars note that to consider the attempts of activists and feminists for women's liberation in India as purely western-inspired (Calman, 1992: 48) is a 'mystification of women's actual history in India' (Liddle and Joshi, 1986: 240). I suggest that this argument is due to the fact that even before this important report appeared there were active women's movements emerging in different parts of the country, each focussing on different local concerns. The 'Towards Equality' report helped spur their activism in a new direction and therefore this document exists as a turning point in Indian history, in terms of creating a sense of awareness among the people about the position of women in their country. The following years witnessed a successful continuation of movements in different parts of the country where women worked as the driving force. Two of the best known women-led movements, which became more successful during the following years, were *Chipko*¹¹ and *Sewa*.¹²

While analysing the structural strain in Indian politics that caused both the creation and aggravation of grievances and encouraged common Indian women to act politically, Calman suggests that these movements have two implications. The first is that existing political institutions cannot produce the desired remedies and the second is that people involved in these movements do not trust the state as the only appropriate arena in which they can resolve their grievances (1992: 21). This conclusion has been substantiated by the fact that, even after the recommendations made by the 'Towards Equality' report to provide a definite percentage of seats for women in rural local self-government units or *Panchayats*, there followed no immediate action at a national level. Nevertheless there were several attempts by regional governments to guarantee the presence of women in the public sphere, as different women's organisations remained active in demanding a broader scope for women in political activities.

Soon after, in 1978, the *Ashok Mehta* Committee was appointed to review the working of the *Panchayati Raj* system. They recommended women's token representation, but also suggested that if no women were elected then the two women who received the highest votes at the District level should become members. Where no woman stood for election, two women might be co-opted. This made the presence of women mandatory in grass-root political institutions all over the country. Over the following

¹¹ *Chipko* is a Hindi term which literally means to 'cling on'. The movement was started in 1974 by thousands of women who gathered together to protest against deforestation decisions made by the Government and stood hugging trees till the cutters were pushed back.

¹² *Sewa* was the first co-operative movement run by women in India. SEWA stands for the Self Employed Women's Association.